

The Secret

BY MARY E. WILKINS FREEMAN

CATHERINE GOULD came hurrying into the house at half past eight. John Greason, the man to whom she was engaged, sat in the south room with her mother and her aunt Sarah. There were a light and a fire in the best parlor, but since Catherine was not at home when he arrived, John sat down with her mother and aunt. They had all waited for Catherine with a curious impatience. It was not very late when John arrived, only quarter of eight, but Catherine was always there to welcome him, and this night she was not, and for some reason it struck them all as being singular.

"I don't see where Catherine is," her mother kept saying, uneasily, as they waited.

"Maybe she ran down to the post-office or the store," suggested Aunt Sarah. Aunt Sarah was knitting some white fleecy wool into a shawl. She also was perturbed, but nothing ever stopped her knitting, although she listened for Catherine's step, and frequently glanced at the clock.

When she made her remark about the post-office and the store, John Greason frowned. He was a handsome young man with a square jaw. He had brought a box of candy for Catherine, and it was on his knees as he sat waiting.

"The last mail comes in at five o'clock," said he. "I went into the store on my way here, and Catherine wasn't there. And I should have met her if she had been on her way home."

"That is so," said Catherine's mother. "I don't see where she is. She never goes out without telling where she is going; and she expected you, too."

"Oh, I dare say she has just run out somewhere," said John. He tried to speak easily, but failed. In spite of himself he frowned. He was angry, albeit unwarrantably so. He was an only son, and things had always gone his way.

His mother and two sisters had always made things go his way. If John had not what he wanted when he wanted it, they felt that something was wrong with the universe. Now it seemed inconceivable to him that Catherine should have gone out when she expected *him*, and when he always came at exactly quarter of eight. He tried to converse easily about the weather and the village news. If Catherine Gould chose to go out when she knew *he* was coming, and not tell where she was going, and keep him waiting, nobody should know that he felt it in the least.

Catherine's mother kept looking out of a window. He sat rigidly with his back to one. The curtains were not drawn, outside there was snow on the ground and there was a full moon, so looking out of the windows was like looking into a bright white world. John would not look. When Catherine's mother looked he grew more and more incensed. He began to consider the advisability of his going home; then at last, just after the clock had struck one for half past eight, Catherine's mother cried out with joyful relief:

"Here she is!"

"Well, I do wonder where she has been," said Sarah, also with joyful relief.

John said nothing. His face looked very heavy and sullen. He was also quite pale.

Catherine came in all rosy and glowing with the cold wind. She came in as if there had been nothing unusual whatever about her disappearance. "Oh, it is cold!" said she. "Good evening, John. Have you been here long?"

"He has been here ever since quarter of eight," said her mother. "Where have you been, Catherine?"

John said nothing. He glanced with cold inquiry at Catherine from under his heavy lids. Catherine was laughing. She was about to answer, when she

caught that look. Then she laughed again and said nothing. She was a very pretty, fairly a beautiful, girl. She was dressed all in red—red hat, red coat, and red gown; there were glints of red in her brown hair. She removed her hat and coat, and going to a glass which hung between the two front windows, thrust her slender fingers into the puff of brown hair over her forehead and fluffed it out, still laughing. Then she turned and looked at them. Her whole face was dimpling with mischief. She was so beautiful that her mother felt a thrill of worshipful pride in her, and her aunt Sarah also. As for John Greason, he looked at her, and his mouth straightened.

"Why don't you tell where you have been, Catherine?" asked her mother. She tried to make her voice chiding, but it was full of tenderness.

Catherine only laughed.

"Why, Catherine Gould, where have you been?" asked her aunt.

Catherine answered for the first time, but not satisfactorily.

"That is a secret," said she, and tossed her head, and laughed again. She moved toward the door and looked gayly at John, evidently expecting him to rise and follow her into the parlor, but he sat still. "There's a light in the parlor, John," said she.

Then he questioned her for the first time. "Where have you been?" he asked.

Catherine looked at him. She hesitated. Then she again gave her head that gay, defiant toss. "That is a secret," said she.

"Why don't you tell him?" asked her mother, anxiously.

Martha Gould was a tall, ascetic-looking woman, with great eyes sunken in deep hollows. She had a curious way of puckering her mouth, and at the same time wrinkling her forehead between the two leaflike curves of her gray hair. Her sister-in-law, Sarah Gould, who had been in her day a very pretty girl, much like Catherine, but had never married, knitted and eyed her niece.

"Aren't you coming in the parlor, John?" Catherine asked again. A deeper red blazed out on her cheeks.

"Where have you been?" asked John, steadily gazing at her.

"That is a secret," replied Catherine, but this time she did not laugh.

"Why don't you tell John where you have been, Catherine?" her mother asked, looking uneasily from one to the other. At that moment the two faces—those of the man and girl—looked singularly alike, although none could be more different in feature and coloring. But they wore the same expression. A terrible similarity of unyielding spirit shone forth from both which marked them as mates. John rose slowly to his feet. The little candy-box in his clenched hand was an absurdity compared with his whole bearing. He looked at Catherine, and she looked back at him. The mother and aunt looked at both of them. The mother opened her mouth as if to speak again, then closed it. The ball of white wool rolled from the aunt's lap on to the floor. Catherine picked it up and returned it.

"Thank you," said the aunt, and there was something awful about that commonplace act and speech in the midst of the tensivity of mood which seemed to fill the little room like an imminent explosive. Immediately John Greason gave the box of candy a violent fling. It just missed Catherine, although he certainly did not aim it especially in her direction. The box struck the floor, burst asunder, and all the sweet contents rolled out. Then John Greason strode from the room and the house without another word. He closed the front door with aggressive caution. One could scarcely hear it.

The women remained for a few seconds as if petrified—Catherine standing, with her mother and aunt looking at her. They were all pale, but different emotions were evident on their faces. On Catherine's mother's were bewilderment, terror, and anger; on the aunt's, bewilderment and terror; on Catherine's, the excess of angry obstinacy.

The mother spoke first. "Well, of all things!" said she.

The aunt followed. "Throwing candy round!" she said, and her tone was nearly idiotic. The situation was in reality too much for her wits.

Then Catherine spoke, and her voice was terrible. "I'll pick it up before it gets trodden into the carpet," said she, and forthwith was down upon her knees, gathering up the scattered sweets.

"What are you going to do?" asked her mother, with a sort of gasp.

"Pick up this candy," replied Catherine, in her terrible voice.

"No, I didn't mean about the candy—about John? Are you—going with him again?"

"A girl doesn't go with a little boy, and marry him after she finds it out," replied Catherine, picking up a pink bonbon.

The mother and aunt looked at each other. They each nodded in pantomime for the other to continue the questioning.

"Why wouldn't you tell him where you'd been?" the aunt asked finally, in her sweet, scared little pipe.

"Because he asked," replied Catherine.

"Because he—asked?" repeated Mrs. Gould.

Catherine turned a set face upon her. "Mother," said she, "let us have no more talk about this. I have nothing more to say. There is nothing more I *will* say. John suspected me of going somewhere or doing something I should not. He questioned me like a slave-owner. If he does so before I am married, what will he do after?"

"Oh my, Catherine!" the aunt cried, in horror.

But Catherine's mother supported her, after a fashion. "I know what you mean," said she. "I never saw a grown-up man do such a silly, childish thing as to throw that candy on the floor that way. There's another piece under that rocking-chair. He has got an awful temper, and one you can't reckon with in a grown man. If he was a child, you could spank him, but as long as he's a man—"

"I don't call him a man," interposed Catherine.

The aunt continued. "As long as he's a man," said she, "all a woman can do is to sit still and do nothing."

"I am not going to sit still and do nothing," Catherine said. She straightened herself and puckered up her red dress skirt into a bag for the candy and broken box, then went toward the door.

"Where are you going now, Catherine?" her mother inquired, anxiously.

"I am going to dispose of this candy."

Catherine opened the door into the icy entry and closed it quickly lest the cold air strike her mother and aunt.

The women heard the front outside door open. Catherine's mother sprang to the window. She saw a white object with a shower of smaller ones describe an arc and land in the glittering snow of the front yard.

"Has she?" hissed Sarah, in a whisper of tragedy.

Martha turned toward her and nodded with a jerk as Catherine came into the room again, closing the door noiselessly and solicitously behind her. The girl held her head up proudly; not a whit of her beautiful color was dimmed. She was even laughing with apparently no effort whatever and with no bitterness. "The sparrows will have a good breakfast to-morrow," said she.

Her mother gave a grim nod. Her aunt made a little whimpering sound.

"I don't see how you can—" she began, feebly, but her sister-in-law, Catherine's mother, interrupted her fiercely.

"What do you want?" she demanded. "Do you want her to sit down and cry because that good-for-nothing fellow has treated her mean?"

"No - o," protested Sarah, who was half weeping.—"no - o, you know I don't, Martha."

"Then why are you talking so? And I declare, you are half crazy! Anybody would think it was your beau."

Sarah began to weep in good earnest then, putting her handkerchief to her working face. "It is only because I do hate to see folks quarrel," she sobbed.

"There is no quarrel that I know of," said Catherine, coolly. She laid some hat-pins side by side on the table and straightened a bow on her hat. "Miss Holmes ought to have put some wire in this bow," she said. "Every time I go out in the wind it flops."

"Yes, she ought," returned her mother.

Sarah gasped. Two people talking about wire in a hat-bow in such a crisis struck her like blasphemy.

"I thought you had quarrelled with him," she ventured, in a faint voice, followed by a little sob like a bewildered child's.

"Not at all," said Catherine, still engaged in perking her hat-bow. "John Greason has simply gone home in a huff like a six-year-old boy because he was thwarted in his curiosity and suspicion.

A quarrel requires two parties, and there is only one. I have not quarrelled in the least."

"But," faltered the aunt, "I don't see why you couldn't have told where you had been."

"So I could have if I had been asked," replied Catherine.

"You were asked."

"No, I was suspected. I don't answer suspicions. I am above suspicion. I have been all my life, and I always shall be." Catherine gave her beautiful head a toss. She seemed taller. The steady gleam of her brown eyes and the noble curves of her broad temples seemed indeed to render suspicion something far from her just due. Still, her mother began to look anxious. When Catherine sat down before the stove, turning up the skirt of her red dress and displaying a beruffled silk petticoat, and remarked casually that it was a bitter night outside and it did seem good to be in where it was warm, her mother continued to regard her with a doubtful and anxious frown. After the aunt had gathered up her work, lit her bedroom lamp, and retired, she spoke her mind freely.

"I hope you have done right, Catherine," she said.

Catherine gave her a quick glance over her shoulder. "You don't think I've been down to the hotel drinking or any wild and desperate thing, I hope, mother," she said.

"No, it isn't that, Catherine. I know wherever you were it was no harm, and in a way I don't blame you for not telling when you were questioned the way you were. It was enough to make anybody mad. It made *me* mad; but I wonder if you have done right, after all, in not telling him."

"I have done the only way a girl with any pride could have done."

"Maybe you have, but—well, you know, Catherine, John Greason is a good, steady fellow."

"So is a mule sometimes," interposed Catherine.

"Well, of course, you are only twenty-three, and there are more chances than one—"

"I had chances before John Greason, and I didn't have to hunt for any of them," returned Catherine.

"That is so."

"But I don't care about chances. What earthly difference does it make? We have enough to live on. I have all I want. What do I care if I never get married? Most of the married women I know would say they wished they were out of it, if they told the truth. It's a lot of care and responsibility. A girl can have a much better time."

"Yes, but a woman can't keep herself a girl always," said Catherine's mother, and an odd expression came over her face—an expression of reminiscent tenderness and softness, and also a shade of embarrassment.

Catherine turned and looked at her mother keenly with her clear, proud young eyes. "Mother," said she—she hesitated a moment, then she continued,—“did you never regret that you got married?”

The mother blushed. She regarded her daughter with a curious, dignified, yet shamed expression. "Marriage is a divine institution," said she, and closed her lips tightly.

"Oh, nonsense!" cried Catherine. "Tell the truth, mother, and let the divine institution go. I know father was a fretful invalid two-thirds of the time. I have heard all about that from Aunt Sarah. I know until grandmother died you had a hard struggle to get along and make both ends meet, because she didn't like your marrying father, and wouldn't help you, and father never was much of a success as a doctor; he had such a temper and was so miserable himself. And I know you had five children as fast as you could, and they all died except me. Now tell me the truth—if you had it all to live over again, would you marry father?"

The flush faded from Mrs. Gould's face. She was quite pale. "Yes, I would, and thank the Lord for His unspeakable mercy," she said, in a low, oratorical voice, almost as if she were in a pulpit. Then the red flashed over her face again, but the embarrassment was gone. Now she looked at her daughter triumphantly, even with superiority. "I was married when I was eighteen years old, five years younger than you are," said she.

"I could have been if I had chosen," replied Catherine, with a look of wonder.

"I know you could. It is your own fault if you have missed the best this life has for any woman. It is your fault now, and it will be your fault. Where were you to-night?"

Catherine rose, frowning angrily. Then suddenly her face relaxed, and she laughed a merry peal. "You would go straight over and tell John Greason, cold as it is, and scared as you are to go out alone at night," said she. "No, mother, I don't tell where I was, and as for missing the best of life, I'll risk it. I'm going to bed. I'm going to help Alice Leeds get her house ready for her afternoon tea to-morrow, and I promised to be over early."

"You might be getting your own house ready for an afternoon tea."

Catherine laughed again. "As if this house wasn't my home, and as pretty and enough sight prettier than Alice Leeds's, and as if I couldn't have an afternoon tea if I wanted it! I think I will, next month."

"It isn't the same."

"I am satisfied. Alice Leeds's husband doesn't want her to have it, and is as cranky as fury for fear his dinner will be late on account of it. I am going to try to get the people off in season, and help Alice hustle away the company fixings, and get her precious husband's dinner on the table so he won't scold."

"Are men coming?" asked Mrs. Gould.

Catherine laughed again as she lit her candle, and the soft light flared over her beautiful face. "Men are asked," she replied, "but it is like man proposes and God disposes. It is Saturday afternoon, and there is no reason why men can't come if they want to; but the question is, Will they want to? I suppose John Greason would have come if he hadn't insulted me with suspecting that I could not be out for an hour after dark without being in some awful mischief, if that is what you mean. Now I don't suppose he will. I should not think he would. Good night, mother; don't worry over it."

If Catherine did not sleep that night, there was no evidence of it in her brilliant face when she came down to breakfast the next morning. Her mother looked as if she had not closed her eyes, and Catherine shot a quick glance of anxiety and annoyance at her.

"For goodness' sake, mother, lie down after breakfast and see if you can't get a nap," she said, when the maid had gone into the kitchen for more muffins. "You will not be fit to go this afternoon."

"I thought maybe I wouldn't," Catherine's mother replied, rather piteously.

"Nonsense!" returned Catherine. "Of course you are going. There you have that beautiful dress all ready—"

"I don't know—"

"I know."

"I thought perhaps I wouldn't go either," remarked Aunt Sarah, who was nibbling at some cereal, with an injured air.

"Of course *you* are going too. Haven't you got that handsome new bonnet on purpose? Goodness! you two don't want Greason's folks to think we are breaking our hearts because he went home last night and flung a box of candy at me! Mrs. Greason and Lottie and Mrs. Ames are sure to be there, with their eyes and ears open, too. Trust them. There is one thing—if I don't have to marry John, I shall be rid of his family, and I must confess that I always did wonder how I would get on with my in-laws."

"John is the best of them," acceded Sarah Gould, tearfully, taking another bit of well-sweetened cereal. "I always said it wouldn't be the easiest thing in the world to get on with his folks."

"And I should have simply been obliged to combine with the whole lot Thanksgivings and Christmases and wedding anniversaries," said Catherine. "There's no loss without a considerable gain. Small gain does not seem the thing in this case. I think myself I have cleared a good six per cent." Catherine had considerable experience in business matters. She managed the property which kept them in comfort, young as she was. The two elder women were entirely helpless in that respect. After Catherine's father's death, his elder brother had taken charge, but since his death, two years before, Catherine had proved herself amply able to conduct matters. She was in reality rather a masterly girl. When she was out in the clear morning air, which bit like steel, for the roads were frost-bound and everything glittering with ice crystals, she held

her head high and swung along with an instinct joy of existence, although she was encountering the first real trouble of her life. She could not remember when her father died. She had not particularly cared for her uncle, who had not particularly cared for her, and his death had not affected her. But she had been in love, and was now, with John Greason, and what had happened last night was no light matter to her; but her pride and her innate joy in existence itself sustained her like a sort of spiritual backbone. She thought of a new red silk gown which she was to wear that afternoon. She could see herself in it, and the men, if men there were, crowding around her, and women too, for that matter. Women liked Catherine. She had an easy good nature, which kept them from jealousy of her beauty. She thought that John Greason's mother and his sister Lottie and his married sister, Mrs. Edgar Ames, would be there, and how they would admire her. She was quite sure that John would have kept his own counsel, that he would not even have told his family of his broken engagement: that he would leave them to find it out for themselves. She was sure that her mother and aunt would have said nothing. She knew that they could not do so without a covert reflection upon herself, since, after all, she had not told where she had been, and although they did not doubt her, others might do so. Even popularity does not shield from the delight of a scandal, and Exbridge was a dull little village. She knew, although people liked her, they could no more resist talking about her, if they had the chance, than they could resist gazing at a sky-rocket on a July night. Pyrotechnics of any kind were simply irresistible to human beings deprived of the natural food of excitement. She knew that although her aunt was not shrewd, her mother was, and she knew that her mother would not tell, and would see to it that her aunt did not.

Catherine had a pleasant time decorating her friend's house for the tea. She enjoyed that sort of thing, and had really a genius for it. She made the rooms charming, and headed efficaciously her corps of workers. That afternoon she achieved a social success in her red silk.

Men came, and she was surrounded by them. She glowed with merriment and healthful enjoyment. John Greason's relatives were there, and extremely friendly. She knew that John had told nothing. In the midst of her pride and indignation she felt a thrill of approbation for his reticence. It was exactly what she herself would have done—what she did do.

Of course his relatives first, then the whole village, finally discovered that he no longer went to see her, that the engagement was presumably broken; but beyond that they knew nothing. Catherine came to get a certain amusement from the various reports which reached her from time to time, but apparently John Greason did not. He grew thin and old-looking. At last it was reported that Catherine Gould had treated him badly, that she had jilted him for a rich man in the city. When Catherine heard that, at a church supper, she turned upon her informer—a friend of hers.

"There is not a word of truth in that, and you can tell everybody so," she said, her cheeks blazing.

"Then you didn't jilt him?"

"No, I did not."

The other girl stared at her with wondering eyes. The conclusion was almost evident that John had jilted Catherine, but in the face of Catherine's radiant joy in life and beauty it seemed ridiculous. However, gradually that report gained ground. John's mother came first to him with it. They were eating supper, on a Friday night, about a year from the day when he and Catherine had separated. John, his mother, his unmarried sister, and his married sister, who was one of the household, her husband being away on business most of the time, were at the table.

"I heard something this afternoon at the 'Improvement Club,'" John's mother remarked, as she poured the tea. She was a large, florid woman, and she looked imposing in her gray brocade waist trimmed with beaded passementerie over her high-corseted bust. She was the president of the "Exbridge Ladies' Improvement Club."

John's sister Lottie, who was slender and plain, cast a sly, scared glance at him with her light, prominent blue eyes. The

married sister, who was like her mother, echoed her.

"Yes, we heard a piece of news," said she. "Pass the biscuits, Lottie, please."

John ate his scalloped oysters and made no rejoinder. The women looked at one another doubtfully, but Mrs. Greason was afraid of nothing.

"We heard why you stopped going to see Catherine Gould," said she.

John took another mouthful of scalloped oysters. The mess was smoking hot and burned his tongue and throat, but he swallowed it grimly and said nothing.

Then Mrs. Ames spoke. "Yes, we heard you jilted her because she was too fond of having other men hanging about her," said she, with a slight repulsive smack of her full lips, as though over a sweet morsel.

Then John looked slowly from one to another, and his face was ashy pale. "It is a lie," said he, hoarsely.

"Then you didn't jilt her for that?" asked his sister, undaunted.

"I didn't jilt her at all. It is a damned lie!" said John, with almost a shout.

"Well, a man cannot expect to go with a girl as long as you went with Catherine Gould, and have her get all ready to be married except her wedding-dress—I know she had her underclothes ready, for she told Lottie so over a year ago—"

"She showed them to me," interposed Lottie, with a squeaky little voice.

"Yes, she showed them to her," said Mrs. Greason, triumphantly. "What I was going to say was, you can't expect—"

But John had pushed his chair back violently and left the table. They heard his heavy rush up-stairs and the slam of his room door.

"He's just like his father," remarked Mrs. Greason, with an odd tone, compounded of respect for the dead and a remembrance of his faults, which was simply due to her own dignity.

Mrs. Ames echoed her in a similar voice. "Yes, father was close-mouthed just like John," said she.

"I'm sorry about it," Mrs. Greason remarked, although as she spoke she took another spoonful of scalloped oysters. "Catherine Gould is a handsome girl, and she has money, and she will have

more. All that consoles me is, I always have wondered how we should get along with her. Unless I miss my guess, she has got an awful temper."

"Yes, I know she has," assented Mrs. Ames. "I shouldn't wonder if that was the trouble—if they quarrelled over something."

"It never seemed to me that Catherine's aunt Sarah was very close-mouthed," observed Lottie.

"Well, Catherine and her mother are, and they'll see to it that she is. Poor Sarah Gould never dares speak unless those two women say she may," returned Mrs. Greason. "Well, your father was a good, upright man, although, of course, he had his little faults like all of us, and I can see them right over in your brother; but, after all, it is better to be a stone jar than a sieve."

"Not with your own folks," said Lottie.

"You can't expect a stone jar to turn into a sieve even for own folks," retorted her mother. "You might have a much worse brother than John." Mrs. Greason spoke with some asperity. After all, John was her favorite. They were much alike. He had inherited his close mouth, and his disposition generally, from her to a much greater extent than from his father, but Mrs. Greason was not given to self-analysis, only to self-assertion, and she did not see herself repeated in her son.

Another year went on. People talked less and speculated less about the breaking off of the engagement between John Greason and Catherine Gould. Nobody had made any discoveries concerning it. John and Catherine went their ways as usual. Catherine seemed to grow handsomer and more brilliant every year. Everybody wondered why she did not become engaged to some one else. As for John, he was said never to look at a girl. This fact probably hurt Catherine a little in spite of her popularity. There were those who made insinuations that her temper had been the cause of the trouble. However, men did not seem to fear it. When a lawyer from New York came to Exbridge on business concerning the settling of an old estate, and remained two summer months at the village inn, and paid much attention to



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THEN JOHN GREASON STRODE FROM THE ROOM

Catherine, people assumed that surely she would win him, or consent to be won. But the lawyer went away, and the woman who kept the village post-office said, after three months had elapsed, that not one letter from New York had arrived for Catherine, and thus that matter was considered settled. Women began to say that Catherine would live and die unmarried in spite of her good looks and prosperous circumstances, and they *opined that she felt slighted, for all her high bearing, and all the more so when John Greason bought the beautiful hill lot on the west side of the brook which divided the village as with a silver ribbon, and began building a house which to simple village tastes was fairly palatial. The story went abroad that John had met a girl in the mountains the summer before, when the New York lawyer had been hanging about Catherine, and that he was shortly to be married—in fact, immediately after the house was finished. It was a mild winter, and the house had been covered in before snow fell, and work was progressing rapidly. People said John would be married in April. None of the Greasons said anything to confirm or deny this rumor. In fact, they were as much puzzled among themselves, even more so, than people outside. They had asked John, but he as usual was non-communicative. They had imagined every marriageable girl in the village as being his prospective wife, but as he never went out evenings they were forced into the conclusion that he might have met somebody at the mountains.*

"I do hope she won't be a tiffy city girl who has been used to servants all her life and won't know a blessed thing about keeping that beautiful new house in order," said Mrs. Greason to her daughters. They were all secretly worried, although they assumed airs of calm wisdom when abroad.

Catherine Gould could see the live glow of the new roof from her own room, and she wondered—if unhappily, she concealed it. She had a new coat that winter, red and fur-lined, and she looked more beautiful and radiant than ever.

It was the last of March, one evening, when the heretofore mild winter had suddenly turned back fiercely upon its tracks, and the cold was bitter in a white moonlit

night, when John came to see her. The "Exbridge Improvement Club" had met at the Gould house that afternoon, and Catherine had the best parlor decorated with carnations, and the lamps were still lighted. A hot-air furnace had been put in that winter, so all the rooms were warm. Catherine, her mother, and aunt were sitting in the parlor talking over the club meeting, when the door-bell rang. The two elder women scuttled across the hall to the sitting-room, and closed the door, all except a crack, and Catherine answered the ring. The one maid was out. There stood John Greason, as pale as death, and seemingly enveloped in a column of wintry air. Catherine stared at him incredulously for a second, after he had said good evening, in a hoarse voice. She could not believe her eyes.

"May I come in?" he asked, and the girl regained command of herself.

"Certainly," she replied, in a crisp voice, and stood aside, with the least perceptible straightening of her graceful figure and toss backward of her head. But poor John Greason did not even look at her. He fairly stumbled over the threshold, and forgot to take off his hat before removing clumsily his greatcoat. Catherine, who was somewhat pale herself, although perfectly self-possessed, stood watching him.

When his coat and hat were in their old places on the hat-tree, he cast an appealing, doglike glance at the girl, then at the parlor door.

"Will you go in the parlor?" said Catherine.

As John followed her into the room, both he and Catherine heard quite distinctly Mrs. Gould say, in a tone of unmixed wonder, "It's John Greason," and they heard her sister-in-law say, "Land!"

John turned after he had entered and closed the parlor door softly.

"Why do you close the door?" asked Catherine, and there was hostility in her voice.

"I wanted to say something to you," replied John, feebly.

"There can be nothing which you need say to me which necessitates the door being closed," replied Catherine.

Then suddenly something boyish, almost childlike, in the man's piteous glance filled her with compassion. "Very



well," she said, and motioned John toward a seat. She seated herself at some little distance from him. The lamplight shone full on his face, and she saw how thin he had grown, what deep lines had come in his forehead, and how pale and nervous he looked. "Aren't you well?" she asked, abruptly.

"Very well, thank you." Both sat still for a few moments, then John rose and made a plunge across the room, stumbling over a rug, and almost fell into a chair beside Catherine. "Will you promise not to speak until I have said something?" he asked, in a voice which Catherine hardly knew for his.

"Yes. Why?"

John commenced speaking rapidly, as if he were repeating a lesson learned by rote. "My new house is done," said he, "and I have been looking at furniture. I can have it all ready to move into soon. I don't want you to tell me where you went that night. Don't speak. Will you marry me and live in my new house with me? Don't tell me where you had been that night. Don't speak. Will you?"

Catherine stared at him. "Are you out of your senses, John Greason?"

"No, don't speak."

Catherine sat mute, gazing at him. She was as pale as he now.

"Will you forgive me and marry me?" asked John, and his voice was almost a groan. Great drops stood on his forehead.

Catherine had a quick sense of humor. "How can I tell you if I don't speak?" said she.

"I mean, don't tell me where you were that night, but only if you will have me, after all."

Catherine continued to stare at him. "John Greason, how do you think I can marry you if I don't tell?" said she.

"You can. Don't tell."

"But I must. It was all over nothing. I got angry because you were so domineering. I had only—"

"Don't speak, don't speak," cried John Greason, in a kind of agony.

"Well, why not? What is the matter with you, John Greason?"

"If you speak, I can never have any opinion of myself afterward. After treating you as I did, after suspecting—I can never be a man in my own eyes if you tell me, Catherine."

"It is the only condition under which I can marry you."

"Then," said John, hopelessly, "I cannot marry you, Catherine. I shall not be fit to marry you afterward."

"Nonsense!"

"It is true. Oh, Catherine, don't speak, for my sake."

Catherine gazed at him. She was not a subtle girl, she could not understand, but she had strong maternal instincts, and she saw, as if through a magnifying lens of sympathy and pity, her lover's tragic face, with the pale thin cheeks and the sweat-beaded forehead; and, moreover, although she had held her head high, she had always loved him. Suddenly, with a soft, birdlike movement, she rose, pulled his head against her shoulder, and wiped his forehead. "What a goose you are!" she whispered.

"Then you will, Catherine?—you do love me, after all?"

"Love is not a thing one flings aside like a glove," said Catherine. "I could have lived in spite of it, and had a good time, too, but a girl like me, when she loves, means it."

"Then you will marry me?"

"I don't know whether I can or not, unless—"

"Oh, Catherine, don't speak. Don't tell me, for God's sake!"

"Then I must have a week to think it over," said Catherine. "I can't make up my mind all in a minute to marry you after all this time and not tell you. I am not sure that you will not always suspect me."

"Catherine, don't you see, don't you know that if you do tell, you must always suspect me of suspecting, and that if you don't tell, you will know I don't?"

Catherine sat pondering. "It is such awful nonsense," she said at length, with a half-sigh.

"It is awful earnest to me. Catherine, I can't marry you if you tell."

"Do you really mean that if I were to tell, and you knew that it was all nothing at all, that you would not love me enough to marry me?"

"I should love you too much to marry you then. I would not have you marry a man who suspected you."

Catherine laughed again. "Well, it is all too much for me," she said. "You



Drawn by Alice Barber Stephens

HER MOTHER AND AUNT ENTERED THE ROOM, ALMOST TIMIDLY

split hairs, where I only look at things. Well, John, I think enough of you, but you must wait a week."

"To-day is Friday. Will you let me know a week from to-night?"

"Yes."

"Then I'll go now," said John, rising.

Catherine wished him to remain longer, but she would not say so. She went with him to the door and assisted him to put on his coat. He fumbled pitifully with the sleeves. The sitting-room door was still ajar. When the two stood in the outer door, John bent toward Catherine. Then he drew back.

"No," he said, "I had better not until I know. It isn't fair, and I have been unfair enough as it is. Good night, Catherine."

"Good night, John," said Catherine. She closed the door behind him and went into the parlor. She sat down, her face a mask of reflection. Presently her mother and aunt entered the room, almost timidly.

"Well?" said her mother, after she had hemmed twice.

"It was John," said Catherine.

Her mother and aunt looked at each other.

"Well?" said her mother again.

"Mother, I can't say a word about it. I can't tell you anything for a week," said Catherine. "I don't know myself what I am going to do."

"Then he—" began her mother.

"Mother, I can't tell you or Aunt Sarah a word to-night," Catherine said, decisively.

Then she went out of the room, and soon her bedroom lamp flashed as she went up-stairs, and she called out good night.

"Well, she's close enough," said Mrs. Gould.

"Her father was awful close too," said Sarah.

"He was the best husband that ever lived, if he was close," returned Mrs. Gould, defiantly.

"I ain't saying a word against him, Martha."

"You'd better not. Catherine is quite right in being close until she knows herself. You aren't close at all, Sarah Gould, and she doesn't want anything all over town until she knows."

"I never said a single word about their

quarrelling," returned Sarah, with an injured air.

"You didn't dare to. You dropped your yarn when you came in here, and it runs 'way back to the sitting-room, twisted round all the furniture. You've got one piece of work getting it un-snarled. Wait. I'll help you."

That night, long after her mother and aunt were asleep, Catherine Gould, muffled up in her warm flannel dressing-gown, sat beside her window gazing out at the wintry moonlit night. She was debating with herself whether she could or could not live without the usual lot of women which her lover had offered her that night. She was quite sure that if she did not marry John Greason, she would never marry at all. He had been so long in her dreams as her husband that she could not violate them. Catherine was an inherently constant girl. If she did not marry John Greason, she would always love him, unless, indeed, he should marry another woman. In such a case it would go hard with her, but she would wrench all love for him from her heart. But she knew that John, if he did not marry her, would never marry another woman. He was as constant as she. She had never, although he had deserted her, believed in the rumors that he was about to marry some one else. But she on her part was unwilling to marry him unless all shadow of secrecy was removed from between them. She told herself that it was hard upon her. First he had demanded that she tell; now he demanded that she should not. Both demands were unreasonable. In spite of her love for him and pity for him, she had a sense of wrath. She wondered if she could not live her life without marriage at all; if she had not better let it all slip away from her, and give him an answer in the negative the very next day. She said to herself that there was no need whatever of prolonging the agony. She had asked for a week, but a few hours were in reality all that were necessary. She gazed out on the white level of the square front yard, lit by snowlight and moonlight. She gazed up at the indeterminate colored sky through which the moon sailed in her golden halo. She gazed at the few stars which the brilliance of the moon left visible. Sparkles as of precious crys-

tals gleamed out here and there from all the landscape. Everything was white and pure and glittering, full of symbolism of the ineffable holiness and passionless of that which is outside the heat of human life. She realized dimly that if she were to say no to her lover, that in spite of her radiant beauty, which was of a kind to endure, in spite of her triumphant philosophy of obtaining whatever she could from the minor joys of existence, and not allowing her body or soul to become lean through deprivation of the larger ones, she would in reality live her life and die her death, as it were, in that cold glitter outside her window. It would be peaceful and beautiful and good, but she would miss the best and sweetest of food for her heart. There was nothing of the nun about her. She was religious, but she was not ascetic. It would have been different if she had never loved any man at all. Then she might have been satisfied and quite content, but the aspect of that cold and virgin radiance outside seemed terrible to her with that leaping flame in her heart.

The next day she gave in. She wrote to John Greason and asked him to come that evening. Her mother and aunt could not go to bed until he had left, although it was late, they were so curious. When the front door had closed after him, Catherine went into the sitting-room and looked at the two elder women, her eyes full of dark fire, her cheeks like roses, her full lips breaking into smiles.

"Well," she said, "I am going to be married the 5th of April, and live in that new house."

Catherine's mother turned pale; her aunt trembled and flushed. Then they both rose and solemnly kissed her.

"Oh, there is one thing," said Catherine, with assumed carelessness. "You must neither of you ever say anything about the trouble which has been between John and me. It is all over now."

"But where were you?" asked her mother, in a whisper. Her aunt looked at her with eyes which seemed able to pierce secrecy itself.

"That is never to be mentioned," replied Catherine, with dignity.

"You don't mean you haven't told him yet?" gasped her mother.

"He did not wish me to."

"Won't you ever?"

"Not if he feels as he does now, that he does not want me to."

"Land!" said Sarah Gould.

"It does seem to me as if she might tell her own mother, if she wouldn't tell him," said Mrs. Gould, after the girl had gone up-stairs.

"She is close, just the way her father was," said Sarah.

"Her father was the best man that ever lived, and she's got a right to keep her own counsel if she wants to," said Mrs. Gould, sharply. "I am glad she hasn't got to live with his folks, and that new house is the handsomest one in town."

"Yes, it is," said Sarah, "and I never could see how she would get along with his folks."

"She could get along with anybody, as far as that goes," retorted Mrs. Gould, with inconsistency.

"I wasn't saying anything against her."

"I don't see why you should. She and her father before her have been the salt of the earth."

Catherine and John were married on the 5th of April, and went to live in the new house. People speculated as to what the quarrel between them had been about and how they happened to become reconciled. They prophesied that they would not be happy. "Both of them are too set and too close to ever get along," said they. But they became as a model of married happiness. They were radiant in love for and utterly content in each other. And John Greason, living with his wife as the years passed and her beauty dimmed and wontedness dulled somewhat the first color of existence for both of them, realized that the little secret of hers which he had never known, that one bit of her own individuality which was outside his ken, caused her to always retain for his lifelong charm her virgin mystery; and her lined but sweet forehead between her silvering folds of hair was always haloed by that thought behind it which he had never known and never would know.